

## [District Nurse]

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### A DAY WITH THE BOONE DISTRICT NURSE

The mists of early morning still wreath the mountains when Miss Lester comes for me. She is the district nurse, and I have often asked to be allowed to accompany her on one of her journeys to the remote hill regions. Her mission today is to notify the country midwives of a meeting at Brushy Fork. She offers me a bright red apple before we settle down—I to feast my eyes on the superb scenery, she to guide us cautiously over the treacherously uneven roadways.

We are drugged with the perfume of the woods. Delicate ferns touch us as we pass by them slowly. The dog Ginger snaps at flies and gnats, but is wary of bees. Miss Lester skillfully manipulates the wheel. In her sturdy black shoes and starched blue uniform she seems a very “poem of service.” Honey-colored hair and an enchanting smile redeem her face from plainness. Up, up nearer the cloudless azure skies we climb into the thin high air.

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We stop for a moment at Meat Camp. Here we visit a young mother whose grandmother is a practicing midwife. The beady-eyed old woman comes out finally and joins us on the cabin porch. Her matted hair and spotless dress are indicative of her complex nature. C9-N.C. Box 2 2 For complex she is, in all probability, like a great many of her North Carolina mountain brethren. By some strange vital force she seems to rise above, to outshadow the bleakness of her poverty. The greasy cabin planks creak eerily as she settles herself in a bottomless cane chair.

"My man is gone," she announces at once. "Took to spitting blood nigh two months ago, and wouldn't eat. Come time for him to go, he went real peaceful like, yes'm he did, and didn't stew or fret for crops or such, but died in God's sweet time and presence like the honest man he were.

"Abe Londin's wife were there when he was took. She give a shriek and fell down faint, but Abe went right on out that door yonder, down the slope, and built a coffin by hisself of pine and hauled it in. It were a real nice way to do." She pauses to glance at her stolid daughter with sore eyes: "Honey, Cora Lee, in yan room you'll find my pipe. Hist yoreself in and fetch it here."

She launches next on an animated account of her profession. "Child, just listen, child," she turns toward Miss Lester and me. "Abe Lindin's sixth girl was born night before last and, child, she had every tooth in her head." She points sprily to her own toothless gums.

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"I haint done much practicing lately. I don't belong to be so busy with other folk's business any longer than I can help. Last month I had to hist myself down the road and over the mounting a right smart piece before I came to the woman's house. It were a right nice home too, reel fixy."

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After a few tactful remarks as to the great advantages to be derived from cleanliness and caution in dealing with the sick, Miss Lester paves the way for our departure. Our hostess's friendly old eyes light with eagerness.

"Honey, now don't you-all hurry off. We can set a spell. I'll come to the meeting sure at Brushy Fork. It was real nice of you to ride by. Yes'm it was." Then turning to me: "Sweetheart, was you raised in this county?" She looks wistfully off across the soft rolling valleys below. "Can't you stay a extry spell?"

Advised that we cannot, she reconciles herself to our departure. Miss Lester expertly turns in the narrow path.

"Mind my dahlias yonder, Honey. You just missed bruising them. I'd as lief they wouldn't get spoiled. Seems like the sun and air and rich dirt there all gives them God's dear strength to grow with, and they make a right purty sight some way. Yes'm they do. It was real nice of you-all to ride by."

Loneliness and sickening desolation met courageously. Birth, death, love, the deep fastness of these hills, all 4 met with the same calm acceptance. As we drove on, remembrance of the friendly, loving look those old eyes had thrown us in farewell spread a warm feeling round my heart.

Now late afternoon has come. A moist chill fills the air. We must find Nancy Ward and notify her of the midwife meeting before we turn back. She lives high in the hills and the way is steep. We stop at a cabin to ask the road. A pallid toothless father and son are plowing corn. They come reluctantly to the window of our car. A little calf nozzles near its mother at the back of the house. A flock of dirty sheep are grazing and a swarm of ragged under-nourished children play near a well. Their grimy faces are sticky with flies. Father and son eye us vacantly, but at mention of Nancy Ward's name their empty faces light up.

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"She lives up yan hill about two mile, a right smart piece."

Their decayed gums are parting in grins. Always a smile for Miss Lester. Dog Ginger yawns and sighs. The mountaineers snicker weakly.

"Ain't he purty as a little hawg, and right peart too?"

The cooling twilight has caught us not turned homeward yet. We stop at three cabins on the way up. Miss Lester leaves suggestions and advice.

"Have tonsils out," "Rest that weak heart," "Come to the meeting; come to the meeting."

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"They ain't anybody could take Miss Lester's place."

A veritable chorus rings in my ears. Dim cities seem remote and unimportant. "Nancy Ward, where are you?" It's getting late. A sudden turn in the road and we've reached the place; the cabin is on the right across this rocky ditch. And on the narrow porch sits Nancy herself, most venerable of midwives, respected by all because of her calling.

The old woman rises with the quiet dignity of the hill people. Pride, sorrow, mirth, are written in her rugged features. Her skin might be envied by many a Park Avenue debutante. Her soft black eyes glow with pleasure. A ten-cent store red necklace graces her neck. On her feet are men's shoes, much too large. On her head is a red felt hat.

"Come in, sweetheart. Hist youreself right over my doorstep and gab a spell." She greets Miss Lester. "Now I ain't caught no babies come two month tomorrow. I aims to quit my traipsing round and set my bones by my own fire. But let me try to quit and some woman's man will come arunning from yan way, and afore I knows it I'm a'tagging at his heels to help, jest like Jake's old hound dog, or some such critter too dumb to rest."

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"Come to the meeting at Brushy Fork," Miss Lester says, "and learn the best new ways to save your patient and yourself. The young doctor has studied and will be there to teach and help us all. We'll all learn about cleanliness together, won't we?"

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"Yes'm, we will and that's the truth. It's the truth and I'll be there with my bag and soap. Just count on me like us folks has counted on you for many a year."

"Fine," says Miss Lester. "That's the kind of talk I like to hear. Now we must go."

"Don't hurry off."

But go we must. The cabin seems a dim speck now far on the trail above. Below the little dusky stars came out and shine like symbols of the understanding of these mountain people.

"It was real nice of you all to ride by." The dim sweet chorus of the hidden friendly army of the hills has remained with me and always will.